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ABSTRACT

Many Americans engage in voluntary activities and many of these volunteers traditionally have been college students and older adults. A functional approach to volunteerism suggests that similar acts of volunteerism may actually reflect very different personal, social, and psychological functions for different volunteers. This study examined the functional similarities and differences between older adults (N=20) and college students (N=27) who had volunteered for the same program, one which involved a 1-year commitment. Volunteers completed the Volunteer Functions Inventory, which assesses six major motives (value function, social function, protective function, understanding function, career function, and esteem function) for volunteering and the Volunteer Needs Profile, which assesses the seven psychological needs (for experience, expression of feelings of social responsibility, social contact, response to expectations of others, social approval, future rewards, and achievement). The results revealed some motivational similarities and differences between the two groups of volunteers. There were no significant differences between older adults and college students in terms of the value or social functions on the Volunteer Functions Inventory. Students scored significantly higher than older adults in terms of being motivated to gain career-related experience. On the Volunteer Needs Profile, there were no significant differences between groups on the social responsibility scale, but college students did score significantly higher than older adults on the need for social approval, the need for future rewards, and the need to achieve. (NB)

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Motivations Underlying Volunteerism: Differences and Similarities Between Student and Senior Citizen Volunteers

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Motivations Underlying Volunteerism: Differences and Similarities Between Student and Senior Citizen Volunteers

Surveys of the American public estimate that a large segment of the population, approximately 80 million people, annually engage in some form of volunteer activity (Independent Sector, 1988). Traditionally, many of these volunteers have been college students and senior citizens. Recently, however, researchers have reported a significant decline in volunteering among college students (Sergent & Sedlacek, 1990). Similar problems in recruitment and retention rates among senior citizen volunteers have also been reported (Stevens, 1990). Although there are many possible reasons for recent declines, some researchers have suggested that difficult economic conditions may make volunteer participation a luxury that only the economically advantaged can participate in (Henderson, 1985).

Although always an elemental issue, it appears concern over motivational issues of volunteersism has been heightened among volunteer coordinators. For example, a recent survey of volunteer coordinators found them calling for more research on motivational issues of volunteerism (Asche & Janey, 1990). Yet, an examination of the psychological research literature reveals a substantial body of data on motivational issues of volunteerism already exists.

The majority of this research, however, can be characterized as comparing the personality and attitudinal differences between volunteers and non-volunteers. Although some personality traits

have been found to be associated with volunteering, these traits do not consistently predict volunteer behavior, nor do they consistently predict commitment to a specific volunteer activity. Currently, most researchers reject the concept of a single personality trait, such as altruism, that would consistently predict volunteerism. Instead most researchers suggest that people volunteer and maintain their volunteering for a variety of reasons. The approach to volunteering that best conceptualizes this multi-motivational perspective is know as the "functional approach" (Clary & Snyder, 1991).

Derived from a contemporary theory of attitude formation and change, the functional approach to volunteerism has been advanced by Gil Clary and Mark Snyder. The functional approach suggests that volunteering may allow a person to meet a variety of important social or psychological needs. Hence, it is possible for a person to volunteer for many different reasons, with each reason serving a different psychological function. The result is that acts of volunteerism that may, on the surface appear similar, may actually reflect very different personal, social and psychological functions. Therefore it does little to lump all volunteers together under a common personality trait of being "altruistic", and all non-volunteers together under the trait of "egoistic", as is often the case in research on volunteerism.

As Clary and Snyder (1991) have suggested, a functional framework is a more applicable to studying volunteerism, because it suggests the relevance of an individual's functions for

volunteering may vary in accordance with their past experiences, their current life situation, and their stage of development. The purpose of the present study was designed to investigate this idea.

Specifically, we sought to examine the functional similarities and differences between a group of senior citizens and college students who had volunteered for the same program. The program involved a year long commitment to design and implement a project that would improve an aspect of the community. It required our volunteers to: (a) target a specific problem in the community, (b) form an action plan to solve the problem and (c) actively begin working on the problem. From a functional framework we made the following predictions:

First, given the substantial personal commitment required by our volunteer project, we expected both groups of volunteers to be similar in terms of having a high internal value of commitment to helping others. We based this prediction on the fact that past researchers have shown committed volunteers to be more motivated by a concern to help others, as compared to less committed volunteers.

Yet, we also expected to see some very different motives between college students and senior citizens. For example, past research evidence, suggests that college students may often be motivated to volunteer to gain career-related experiences and training. In contrast, senior citizens may be more motivated than younger adults to volunteer in order to maintain social

contacts with others in their community.

Method

Subjects

Subjects consisted of 27 Marietta College students (8 male, 19 female) and 20 Senior citizens from the community (7 male, 13 female). All participants had volunteered in response to a written description and request to participate in a year long program requiring significant commitment and time.

Procedure

The volunteer program was designed to bring college students together with senior citizens from the community to form mentor relationships. The focus of the relationships was to voluntarily work together to design and implement a community improvement project. Before beginning the program, and as part of a separate study, all volunteer participants completed a series of questionnaires examining general attitudes toward volunteerism. In addition, the participants completed two questionnaires specifically derived from a functional perspective toward volunteering.

The first questionnaire was the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Ridge et al., 1990). In brief, the Volunteer Functions Inventory was developed to assess six major motives that volunteering may serve for an individual. Although many additional motives may be involved, the authors have attempted to measure some of the more general motives that have been suggested by past empirical studies to be associated with volunteering.

The inventory is useful in examining how an individual will differ with respect to the strength of any one of the six major motives. Individuals responded by marking how important a reason is for their volunteering on a one to seven point scale, one being of little importance and seven very important. Each of the following six major motivational functions is represented by five statements:

1. The first is the Value function: Here volunteering reflects a person's deeply held beliefs, and values concerning a commitment to help others.

2. Next is the Social function: Volunteering allows a person to interact and get along with significant others. It allows social contact with important reference groups that also volunteer.

3. Third is the Protective function: Volunteering may allow a person to deal with anxiety, stress or inner conflict.

4. Fourth is the Understanding function: Volunteering can provide insight into the world, allowing a person to understand how things and people work.

5. Next, there is the Career function: For some people, volunteering provides training and experience in career related areas. It provides skills and benefits that may help them in a job.

6. Finally, there is the Esteem function: Volunteer activity provides them with a feeling of self-worth and competence. It allows one to be true to one's self-concept.

Although the Volunteer Functions Inventory is still undergoing evaluation by its' authors, initial evidence indicates it to be valid and have significant reliability (average alpha coefficient of .81).

Volunteers in the program also completed a second questionnaire from a functional perspective, The Volunteer Needs Profile (Francies, 1983). The Volunteer Needs Profile was developed to assess seven different psychological needs. These seven needs are believed to be ones that are commonly met by performing volunteer activities. Although some of the seven subscales appear similar to the Volunteer Functions Inventory, the Volunteer Needs Profile was derived from a Worker Adjustment Model. It is designed to help match volunteers with a specific volunteer activity. The assumption is that the stronger the match between a volunteer's needs and the specific volunteer activity the person is engaging in, the more satisfied and committed the volunteer will be. Although the author of the Volunteer Needs Profile reports adequate reliability and validity for this task, it has not been used to compare between groups of volunteers. Nevertheless, the author of the scale suggests the Volunteer Needs Profile would be useful for this purpose.

The Volunteer Needs Profile asks respondents to mark if a statement is like them or not like them on a four point scale, with five statements for each of the seven major needs. The seven major needs measured by the questionnaire are:

1. The need for experience: Defined as the need to acquire

new skills, and broaden one's range of experiences.

2. The need to express feelings of Social responsibility.: Concern and feelings for others. A need to get involved and improve others lives.

3. Need for Social Contact: The need to make new friends and socialize with others.

4. The need to respond to the expectations of others: Some people volunteer because of pressure from others. At times one's employer, social organization or school may recommend or even require volunteering.

5. The need for social approval: The need to be praised, respected or recognized for one's actions. Volunteering may allow one to be looked up to by others.

6. The need for future rewards: This is the feeling that someday an individual themselves may also need help. It is the belief that by helping others, a person may avert being in need.

7. The Need to Achieve: The need for a sense of power, or completion. The sense of satisfaction from making a change and having an impact.

Results

A comparison of the backgrounds of senior citizens and college student volunteers found both groups to have ample experience with volunteerism. Ninety-five percent of the senior citizens were currently volunteering at the time the project began, and the remaining 5% had volunteered in the past. Thirty-three percent of the students were currently volunteering on

other projects, 63% had volunteered in the past, and only 4% had never volunteered.

Both groups of volunteers were similar in that they both held positive attitudes about volunteerism, although senior citizens held significantly stronger opinions. For example, each group believed that participating in volunteerism was personally important to them. They also believed that one person could make a difference in solving society's problems and that society still emphasized volunteerism.

Analysis of the Volunteer Functions Inventory did reveal some motivational similarities and differences between the two groups of volunteers (see Table 1). For example, as predicted there was no significant difference between senior citizens and college students in terms of the value function. Given the commitment necessary for this project it is not surprising that both groups expressed a commitment to help others, and therefore scored high on this function.

Also as predicted, college students, scored significantly higher than senior citizens in terms of being motivated to gain career related experience from their volunteering. This coincides with the fact that college students have not yet entered the work-force, whereas many of our senior citizens had retired.

Contrary to our prediction that senior citizens would be more motivated to volunteer to maintain social contacts in the community, there were no significant differences in terms of the

social function.

As mentioned previously, the Volunteer Needs Profile is similar in some ways to the Volunteer Functions Inventory, although it attempts to measure how a specific volunteer activity may meet a psychological need. Analysis of participant's responses to the Volunteer Needs Profile data revealed no significant differences between senior citizens or college students on the social responsibility scale (see Table 2). This scale is similar to the value functions subscale on the Volunteer Functions Inventory. Again, both groups appeared to score relatively high.

Unlike the Volunteer Functions Inventory, a significant difference between senior citizens and college students was demonstrated, with senior citizens scoring significantly higher than students.

Although we made no other specific predictions, further comparisons of the subscales of the Volunteer Needs Profile revealed some interesting differences. For example, college students scored significantly higher on the need for social approval, the need for future rewards and the need to achieve. Although we can only speculate on these differences, perhaps they were related to the senior citizens extensive history of community involvement. In other words, our senior citizens may have had these needs met by other activities and accomplishments.

Discussion

In the coming weeks our volunteers will be completing their

year long program. We plan to give follow-up questionnaires and evaluate the potential of the Volunteer Functions Inventory and the Volunteer Needs Profile for predicting volunteers commitment and success on specific volunteer activities. Although our findings are preliminary, we believe they show support for the Functional Approach to volunteerism of Clary and Snyder. We believe the Functional Approach has important implications for volunteer organizations.

In conclusion, we can not assume that all individuals, including senior citizens and college students volunteer for one common reason. If volunteer coordinators are going to recruit and retain motivated volunteers they must attempt to match volunteers with activities that serve their psychological needs and motives. As a volunteer's psychological needs are met, motivation, and commitment should increase. It is important that Volunteer Organizations be aware of the motivational similarities and differences between various sub-populations of volunteers. Further research on volunteerism from a functional approach should aid us in this task.

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Table 1

Mean Ratings of Senior Citizens and Students on Volunteer Functions Questionnaire

	Senior Citizens	Students
Value Function	6.25	5.96
Social Function	3.65	4.14
Protective Function	3.55	3.33
Understanding Function	5.35	5.62
Career Function	2.45	4.25**
Esteem Function	5.15	5.07

Note: Higher scores indicate greater importance of value

* Two-tailed t-test ($p < .05$)

** Two-tailed t-test ($p < .01$)

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Senior Citizens and Students on Volunteer Needs Profile

	Senior Citizens	Students
Need for Experience	13.80	13.85
Need to Express Feeling of Social Responsibility	15.35	15.59
Need for Social Contact	15.40	14.07*
Need to Respond to the Expectations of Others	10.50	10.77*
Need for Social Approval	11.30	13.25*
Need for Future Rewards	12.80	14.55**
Need to Achieve	11.60	13.11*

Note: Higher scores indicate greater need

* Two-tailed t-test ($p < .05$)

** Two-tailed t-test ($p < .01$)